

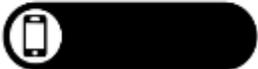
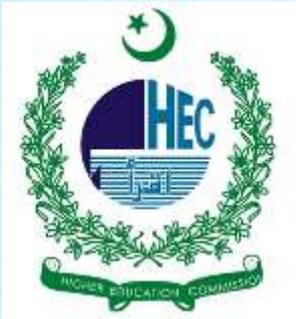
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**FEAR, DESIRE, AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT IN TARIQ  
RAHMAN'S *THE INNOCENT THIEF*: A PSYCHOANALYTIC  
STUDY**



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## Abstract

*This paper provides a psychoanalytic critique of *The Innocent Thief* by Tariq Rahman which explores how fear, desire and moral growth interact in the life of a child protagonist, Saleem. The research is based on a qualitative, interpretive methodology incorporating the theory of the unconscious and id-ego-superego model of Sigmund Freud with the child psychology and the defense mechanisms proposed by Anna Freud. As the analysis illustrates, fear in the story is most a product of the unconscious anxieties and not the external danger, and it manifests itself through the symptoms of physiological reactions, projection of imagination, and an increased suspense. Id impulsive desire of sweets is demonstrated by the fact that Saleem missing sweets and his planning and hesitation are the characteristic features of the mediating role of the ego and the early development of the superego with the help of guilt and self-blame. Based on the developmental paradigm by Anna Freud, the paper re-conceptualizes the theft act as a psychologically and developmentally relevant reaction to want and not as a moral offence. The study bridges a very important gap in the discussion of Pakistani English short fiction, specifically, child-centered stories, by incorporating both classical and child-centered approaches to psychoanalysis. Finally, the paper highlights the importance of psychoanalytic literary criticism to shed light on the psychology of childhood and the complexity of the process of negotiation between fear, innocence, and the unconscious in short stories.*

### **Keywords**

*Psychoanalytic literary criticism; Sigmund Freud; Anna Freud; unconscious; id-ego-superego; child psychology; defense mechanisms; fear; innocence; moral development; Pakistani English fiction; Tariq Rahman; *The Innocent Thief**

## Introduction

Childhood is not a new literary topic, and it is a rich field through which authors can explore the instincts of desires, fears, and morality. Child protagonists in short fiction tend to negotiate complicated inner and outer worlds that disclose psychological operations that go beyond the surface of the story. *The Innocent Thief* by Tariq Rahman is such a story, yet it is based on the life of a young boy, Saleem whose deeds, though being at once innocent and morally dubious, help understand how instinctual desire, fear, and new moral consciousness interact. One of the scenes described in the story occurs during the night when Saleem wants to steal a small box of sweets. There is a lot of suspense, fear, and anticipation throughout the narrative, which highlights the internal and external struggles that the child experiences. Due to the elaborate accounts of the physiological reactions, imaginary extrapolations, and careful preparations, Rahman opens the door to the complex process of the child psyche and calls on a psychoanalytic reading. The emphasis of

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the story on the inner dialogue of a child between the desire and the fear predisposes it to the Freudian and post-Freudian interpretation.

Although a considerable amount of psychoanalysis literary studies has concentrated on adult characters or the Euro-American canon, not much has been done on the Pakistani short fiction that contains child characters. *The Innocent Thief* can be an excellent locus to such investigation, especially as it deals with the theme of fear, morality, and desire. The psychoanalytic approach to studying the behavior of the child enables the scholars to perceive the complexity of developmental aspect of apparently simple acts like stealing, being hesitant or a projection into their imagination. This research brings together the classical Freudian theory and the child psychology of Anna Freud to bring out the universal and developmental aspects of the story. Classical Freud analysis offers understanding of unconscious motivations, id-ego-superego, and occurrence of anxiety, whereas the approach of Anna Freud offers an insignificance on the defense mechanisms, moral development, and strategies of coping that are deficiently appropriate considering the stage or age. Such a dual treatment allows a detailed insight into the child character, which unites the literary research and the developmental psychology.

## **Research Questions**

1. How does fear emerge from the unconscious in “The Innocent Thief”?
2. How does Sigmund Freud’s id–ego–superego model explain Saleem’s actions in the story?
3. In what ways does Anna Freud’s child psychology redefine the concept of “theft” in “The Innocent Thief”?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Psychoanalytic literary criticism has been considered one of the longest-lasting and fruitful methods in literary research, especially when it comes to examining character psychology, fear, desire, moral transgression and unconscious motivation. Developed by Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis offers means of analysis of how the literary texts dramatize the internal psychological struggles and are not just the reflection of the actual reality. The relative lack of plot and heavy psychological emphasis found in short stories has made them particularly susceptible to psychoanalytic analysis. The unconscious, repression, fear and id-ego-superego model has been a common topic in studies by scholars to examine how actions of characters are brought about by concealed psychological drives.

The literature review is a critical study of classical and modern psychoanalytic works on short stories with specific focus on fear, unconscious motivation, and child psychology. It contextualizes the current study on the literature already present in the field and also establishes gaps that require a psychoanalytic interpretation of Tariq Rahman article on *The Innocent Thief*. The review, in accordance with the model offered by Kwan (2006), shifts the general theoretical foundations into particular empirical studies and ends by pinpointing areas of deficiency in research that are filled by the present study.

## **Theoretical Foundations of Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism**

Psychoanalytic literary criticism is founded upon the theory of psychoanalysis introduced by Sigmund Freud, the unconscious. According to Freud (1900), the behavior of human beings is highly dictated by unconscious desires and repressed fears, which are directly manifested through

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dreams, slip of tongue and symbolic behaviors. These subliminal aspects in literature can be in the form of image, ambiance, and unreasonable terror. In the theory of the Uncanny, Freud, in his seminal essay of the same title, (1919) illustrates that it is not the fear of the unknown but rather the repressed that comes back thus causing fear. His work in analyzing the short story, *The Sandman*, by E. T. A. Hoffmann, is one of the most influential psychoanalytic interpretations of the short story, and how domestic spaces once familiar, turn into spaces of terror as unconscious fears are repressed. The model proposed by Freud is especially applied to the text in which the fear is unsuitable in relation to reality. Fear is a psychological effect and not a reasonable reaction in such texts, something which can be seen in most short stories where characters envisage things that are not really a threat. Freud (1923) presents the tripartite psyche in *The Ego and the Id*; the id, ego, and superego. The id is the instinctual desire that is ruled by the pleasure principle, the ego is an intermediary between the desire and the reality, and the superego is the internalized moral authority. This model has been extensively used to describe morally ambiguous behavior like crime, violence and transgression in short-fiction by literary scholars.

According to Tyson (2006) psychoanalytic literary criticism shuns moral judgement to characters but attempts to discover the psychological forces that drive the behavior that the characters exhibit. A theft or even violence is understood as a symbolical manifestation of the conflict in the unconscious mind and not consciously made moral decisions. This model proves particularly effective in the case of child characters, whose moral sense is not yet established.

The works of Anna Freud help to perfect classical psychoanalysis through the work on child development and ego psychology. Freud (1936/1966) in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* claims that children are mostly guided by the instinctual desire and anxiety management and not the moral decisions. She mentions defense mechanisms, which include regression, withdrawal and denial, as common responses to fear in childhood. The theory of Anna Freud has also been applied in literary works to bring back the misbehavior of children in fiction. Instead of perceiving such actions as failure to be ethical, critics under the influence of Anna Freud interpret them as psychological coping mechanisms. This point of view is especially applicable to the stories in which children perform crimes that are defined by the adults as wrong but without criminal intent or moral consciousness.

### **Psychoanalytic Studies of Short Stories**

A psychoanalytic study of short stories was among the earliest continuing psychoanalytic interactions with short stories, as discussed by Marie Bonaparte (1949) in her psychoanalytic work on Edgar Allan Poe. *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-Tale Heart* are some of the stories that Bonaparte views as a manifestation of the unconscious guilt, repression and obsessive compulsion. In the fiction of Poe, crime is not described as a rational vice but an outburst of suppressed desires. Critics of Freud who came after Bonaparte have focused on the fact that fear and guilt in these tales are not forced on them by others but arising within them. This custom sets a precedent to read criminal or transgressive acts in short stories as being psychologically motivated, but not morally calculated. The concept of the uncanny introduced by Freud (1919) has been used in the analysis of short stories many times. The works of Hoffmann, Kafka and Poe show how the seemingly commonplace environment can be terrifying when the subconscious fears are revealed. The uncanny is especially staged well in the short story form, which has its dependence on the atmosphere and psychological tension. All these studies demonstrate that psychoanalysis is not a theoretical abstraction but a

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practical interpretative method of explaining the role of fear as a narrative.

One of the recent contributions to the literature of psychoanalysis is the article *A Psychoanalytic Analysis of Selected Short Stories of Manto* by Khan and Ali (2024). The authors apply Freudian theories to explain the influence of psychological trauma caused by the violence of Partition in defining behavioral patterns in characters using Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and hysteria. Their analysis shows that fear, instability and moral disintegration in the stories of Manto are the symptoms of the underlying trauma, but not personal moral infirmity. This empirical paper supports the fact that psychoanalysis remains topical in South Asian short fiction and that unconscious fear can rule the perception of characters even when they are not in danger.

Fatima, Solangi, and Ahmed (2024) uses Freudian and Anna Freudian theories in the short story *The Boarded Window* by Ambrose Bierce. The researchers are concerned with repression, denial, and unresolved grief as psychological processes that define the actions of the protagonist. The study explains how both fear and guilt are unconsciously controlling the behavior even after the traumatic experience has been experienced. This study is especially pertinent to the current study because it shows the presence of fear even in the absence of external threats in the person psychologically, which supports the idea of Freud about the internalized anxiety.

An example of using Freudian psychoanalysis to study childhood obsession, desire, and parental influence is a study by Saberi (2025) of D. H. Lawrence in the story *The Rocking-Horse Winner*. The obsession of the child protagonist is explained as the unconscious reaction to the deprivation of emotions, but not greed. The paper points out that the activities of children in the short stories are usually a result of unfilled psychological needs. This can be seen to agree with the claim of Anna Freud that children are influenced by instinctual desires and they do not have a complete moral judgment.

In Poe, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Lara (2025) uses Freudian theories of repression and guilt to describe the psychological breakdown of the narrator. The research supports the thesis that fear and confession are the result of unconscious pressure and not legal and social threats.

Khan and Ahmed (2018) use an empirical study involving the use of the id-ego-superego model of Freud to short-fiction characters. Their results point towards the consistent association of impulsive behaviors with the dominance of the id, and guilt and fear as a result of the superego-activation. This paper justifies the relevance of Freudian model to literary works.

Although the current literature bears witness to a wide range of psychoanalytic treatment of short stories, there are still a number of gaps. To begin with, fear is frequently associated with trauma, violence, or adult psychopathology despite the existing body of research. Child-centered fear especially fear based on unconscious expectations and not actual offense is not well examined. Second, the majority of the studies concentrate on one of Freud or Anna Freud, but rarely on the combination of classical psychoanalysis and child psychology. This division restricts the interpretative power of psychoanalysis in the analysis of narratives that involve kids. Third, psychoanalytic focus on Pakistani English short stories has been much less than on Urdu fiction or western literature. *The Innocent Thief* by Tariq Rahman has not been analysed in a systematic manner using the psychoanalytic approach although it has a deep psychological depiction of fear, desire and innocence as a child.

As it has been shown in this review, psychoanalytic criticism, specifically the theory of unconscious presented by Freud and child psychology introduced by Anna Freud, could still be a helpful tool in the study of short stories. The literature on the subject confirms that fear is frequently a result of

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internal psychological struggle but not external danger and the actions of children in literature should be interpreted as instinctual and defensive as opposed to being morally deviant. Nevertheless, there is no synthesized Freudian and Anna Freudian interpretation of Pakistani English short stories, which points to a critical gap in research. The current research fills this gap, as it provides psychoanalytic interpretation of the story "*The Innocent Thief*" in terms of unconscious fear, psychic structure and child psychology.

## METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted in this study is a qualitative and interpretive design based on psychoanalytic literary criticism. A qualitative textual analysis is suitable since the research is expected to examine the psychological meaning, subconscious motivation, and symbolic expression of fear and desire in a literary work as opposed to quantifying the variables of interest. Psychoanalysis being a theory that deals with the inner processes of the mind is a natural fit with close reading and interpretation of narrative discourse.

In the study, the author of the short story is Tariq Rahman and the story under consideration is *The Innocent Thief*. Case-study method enables one to discuss psychological patterns in depth, especially how fear is produced by unconscious and how childhood behavior is created through the narrative.

### Theoretical Framework

Two psychoanalytic models are used to inform the analysis:

The psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, which involves the unconscious theory, the role of fear and repression and of the id-ego-superego model of the psyche (Freud, 1923).

Child psychology, especially ego development in children, the features of defense mechanisms: regression, withdrawal, denial and the difference between the desire of an instinct and a moral intent (Freud, A., 1936/1966).

These structures are applied not in the form of diagnostic instruments but as a prism through which the behavior of characters and the structure of the narration can be interpreted.

### Text Selection

The piece of writing, which will be analyzed, is *The Innocent Thief* (written 1968; published 1986) by Tariq Rahman. The selection of the story was done according to the following criteria:

It revolves around a child character, which makes it appropriate to the psychoanalytic child-centered approach. It anticipates fear, secrecy, and desire, which are the most important in Freudian theory. The story brings a moral paradox, in which a crime that is considered as theft is proved as psychologically innocent. It is a work that is not well explored in the field of psychoanalytic literature, especially in the Pakistani English literature. The analysis lacks comparative texts, but rather it is more of a depth analysis than breadth.

This approach offers a logically based and theoretically developed method of analyzing *The Innocent Thief* using psychoanalytic literary criticism. The paper combines the theory of unconscious by Sigmund Freud and child psychology by Anna Freud to provide a subtle idea of fear, desire, and moral innocence in short stories.

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## **DATA ANALYSIS**

This chapter will make a systematic psychoanalysis of the article written by Tariq Rahman entitled *The Innocent Thief*, particularly the psychological processes that drive fear, desire, and moral actions. The three research questions help in the analysis by setting the role of the unconscious, the id-ego-superego dynamic, and the interpretive lens of child psychology in advance. Since this is more of a psychological narrative, a qualitative, interpretive approach to the study is most suitable since it can be used to explore the inner world of feelings and symbolic meanings without generalizing through statistics. The short story is used as a case study in the study and this allows a deeper illustration of the behavior of the child protagonist as it can be observed both in the nuanced emotional reactions and in the overt actions of the narrative. This chapter places the text in the two-theoretical contexts of Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud in order to explore how fear is produced, how desire is mediated by internalized moral forms and how child-specific coping processes redefine normative conceptions of morality, including theft. This method accentuates that literary works are considered to be windows in the human soul, where narrative devices, imagery, and the action of characters are not only aesthetic, but also the manifestation of inner psychic processes. In this regard, this discussion aims to fill the gap between the literary interpretation and the psychological theory and show that psychoanalytic instruments can be used to understand individual and developmental aspects of childhood behavior in literature.

The theoretical framework of the present study lies in the dual-theoretic approach, which comprises the classical theory of psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and the theory of child-centric psychoanalysis of Anna Freud. It is through this integration that the universal as well as the developmental aspects of human psychology can be thoroughly explored in the text. According to the theory of the unconscious, Freud believed that a significant part of the human opinion and behavior is determined by suppressed desires and unprocessed fears (Freud, 1900). These unconscious aspects are usually expressed in literary work in an indirect manner in the form of symbolic action, emotional stress, and narrative tension, which create scenes of fear, suspense, and moral dilemma. The structural model of psyche as proposed by Freud: the id, ego, and superego can be used as a critical point of entry into the discussion of internalized negotiations between the instinctual drive and rational mediation and moral regulation (Freud, 1923). In this context, even irrational or ethically ambiguous behaviors like secret activities or extreme planning are explainable by the fact that internal psychic conflict is underway instead of the individual moral failure. Fear, in its turn, is not merely addressed as the response to the external stimuli, but rather the expression of the repressed anxieties and the unresolved intrapsychic tension, the tendency that is particularly strong in the stories that involve child protagonists.

The works of Anna Freud on psychoanalysis broaden the scope of the theory applied to child development by focusing on the role of the ego to deal with the instinctual drives and environmental demands (Freud, A., 1936/1966). She singles out defense mechanisms, such as regression, denial, and withdrawal as the key tools with the help of which children cope with anxiety and inner turmoil. These processes allow children to interact with wants and anxieties without a full ethical understanding, and it is important to note that the behavior normally viewed as transgressive actually can be seen as a normal psychological defense in development. The framework of Anna Freud can be used in the literary analysis to interpret child characters in a subtle way, especially regarding the interaction between the instinctual desires and social norms and parental authority. Using this scheme to the case of *The Innocent Thief*, the paper will look at how

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stealing, fear of doing wrong, and concealing are more clearly seen as developmental and defensive mechanisms than a failure of moral initiative.

The combination of Freud and Anna Freud theories allows one to use a multi-layered approach to analysis: the traditional Freudian theory explains the universal psychic mechanisms of fear and guilt, and the child-oriented model puts them into the context of developmental psychology. This two-lens enables the study to explain the actions of Saleem as complex phenomena of a psychological nature that is both an expression of instinctual drives and as an expression of a moral consciousness, which enables the researcher to gain a complete picture of what is going on in his inner world.

It is analyzed on three fundamental psychoanalytic dimensions, which are fear and the unconscious, id-ego-superego relations, and child-specific defense mechanisms. The extracts of the novel are coded to these themes to show the psychological mechanisms in the behavior of Saleem.

## Fear and the Unconscious

The Fear is a prevailing theme in the story and it turns out to be an outcome of the unconscious, which is in line with the Freudian theory that a large part of human anxiety is internal and not externally induced (Freud, 1900). The book begins with a bright image of darkness and suspense:

*“It sent animals to rest, birds to roost and struck the terror of the unknown in the child’s heart. It was everywhere with its mysterious darkness.”*

In this case, the term darkness is used to refer to the unconscious mind and the terror of the unknown to the repressed fears that haunt the child. The physiological reactions of Saleem, who sweats cold oozing out of the pores on his forehead... His knees shook and gave way beneath him"-- the example of somatic manifestations of fear, an example of how Freud taught that repressed impulses tend to be manifested in the body (Freud, 1923). In addition, imaginary projection, which is also an unconscious process, enhances the feeling of fear in the story:

*“Her imagination painted the very worst forms for her. She thought she saw the outlines of a furious assassin with murder in his eyes and a bloody knife in his hand. A sudden shudder passed over her entire frame, and the assassin was suddenly replaced by another loathsome presence—a ghost. Its eyes were fierce like a man’s when angry; the sharp teeth glinted in the darkness; then a demon, a vampire... and a thousand other terrifying ‘things.’”*

Whereas the housewife feels threatened by the outside world, the text also highlights the child as experiencing an internalized anxiety that points to the fact that fear is enhanced by the internal psychic mechanisms and not external danger.

## Id-Ego-Superego Dynamics

The actions of Saleem are also evaluated using the structural model of the psyche by Freud:

Id (instinctual desires): The id is evident in the desire of the sweets by Saleem which is described as:

*“He would be the sole possessor of the desirable object. It flashed across his mind in myriad-hued brilliancy. How he had been longing for it in the long pale hours of the day.”*

This is what the psyche, the pleasure-seeking tendency, the impulsive part is driven by, and this aspect is driven by the instinctual satisfaction.

Ego (reality principle): careful planning of Saleem mirrored in creeping toward the cupboard, estimating the risks, stopping the stool as it made a sound:

*“He walked a few steps, turned back, said a silent prayer, and brought the stool half way down. Then, as suddenly as before, he refrained from putting it down, and stood still, stool in hand, for a long time.”*

The ego controls the impulses of the id by thinking and restraining them.

Superego (internalized morality): Saleem has some primitive understanding of societal rules and parental authority:

*“Now he cursed himself for what he had done, and repented at his folly.”*

In this case, the guilt and self-reproach are signs of the development of moral consciousness which is a typical feature of superego development even in a child.

### **Anna Freud’s Child Psychology and Defense Mechanisms**

The framework of Anna Freud enables us to interpret the actions of Saleem as being developmentally suitable in reaction to fear and desire. The most important defense mechanisms can be observed:

Regression: Saleem shows childish fright and stands still and trembles, as in:

*“Chilled with sheer fright frozen in the hands and feet, the shadow sank down and lay prostrate and limp on the floor.”*

Regression has a reflection of earlier and more dependent states when under stress.

Denial and Rationalization: The child bargains with inner fear by thinking of other possible results:

*“‘Nothing is lost yet. I can escape.’ For a moment he wavered, and then once again the irresistible temptation of his desire overcame his fear.”*

The rationalizations of Saleem make him right to himself and allow the ego to reconcile the desire and anxiety.

Moral Innocence: The model of Anna Freud is focused on the idea that the child stealing is not always a planned action, but rather an instinctual one, which explains the end of the story:

*“Only the boy did not laugh. He could not, his mouth was too full of sweets.”*

This shows that the act done by Saleem is innocent desire fulfillment instead of morally corrupt action.

The discussion shows a complex interaction between subconscious fear, instinctive desire, and the formation of moral awareness: Fear comes up because of the unconscious and is enhanced through imagination, which is in line with Freudian anxiety theory. The behavior of Saleem is a sign of negotiation of the id, ego and superego. Child psychology redefines theft as a developmental process, which emphasizes on coping strategies instead of moral deviance. The narrative shows that what can seem on the surface as a moral or behavioral violation is really a complicated act of bargaining between the forces of the psyche, which proves the usefulness of psychoanalytic theories in literary studies. These interpretations are supported by empirical studies. As an example, Khan and Ali (2024) have noted that symbolic imagery often exhibits unconscious fear in the narration of children. In the same manner, Fatima et al. (2024) demonstrated that physiological reactions in child protagonists are frequently engraved with latent anxiety, whereas Saberi (2024) and Lara (2025) highlight the role of id, ego, and superego in short fiction. By integrating these studies, it is possible to place the work of *The Innocent Thief* in a wider context of psychoanalytically-inspired literary studies.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has done a psychoanalytic analysis of Tariq Rahman in his book, *The Innocent Thief*, based on the fear, desire, and moral growth within the child, Saleem. Through the classical psychoanalytic theory by Sigmund Freud and the child psychology by Anna Freud, the study has been able to provide an understanding on how the inner psychic mechanisms determine the behavior of the child and his narrative experience. The discussion shows that the element of fear in the story is also created by the unconscious with the assistance of imagination and internalized fears. The physiological and cognitive reactions of Saleem: trembling, freezing and increased vigilance, mirror the idea by Freud about somatic expressions of repressed fear. Meanwhile, the interaction of the child id-ego-superego dynamics in relation to the negotiation of instinctual desires to eat sweets, rational thought of how to avoid being discovered, and the emergence of moral consciousness leading to guilt and stuttering, is depicted in the story. Using the child psychology as applied by Anna Freud, the paper re-conceptualizes the theft by Saleem as a developmentally necessary act of desire in terms of a defense mechanism of regression, denial, and rationalization. The innocence of the child and his eventual satisfaction further highlight the need to comprehend childhood behavior using developmental and psychological theories, as opposed to making adult moral judgments. The paper adds to the literary literature through its in-depth psychoanalytic approach to the Pakistani short fiction, which is a corpus that has been underrepresented in the analysis of children. The combination of classical psychoanalytic theory and developmental psychology gives the research a methodological and interpretive model of analyzing other short stories which have child protagonists. To sum up, *The Innocent Thief* is one of the examples of the complexity of childhood psychology in literature that proves that fear, desire, and moral negotiation are deeply interwoven. This work supports the usefulness of psychoanalytic methods in the works of literature, and the interdisciplinary nature of literature and psychology. Further studies can build on this framework to make comparative studies of child protagonists in cultural and linguistic contexts that will add more to our comprehension of the developmental and psychological aspects of narrative fiction.

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